

U.S. Reverses East Asia Withdrawal Plan;

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The United States has reversed plans to withdraw more military forces from East Asia, deciding to hold U.S. troop levels in the region at about 100,000 and keep at least an Army division and an Air Force combat wing in South Korea, the Pentagon announced yesterday.

Concerns about unpredictable North Korean and Chinese intentions in a part of the world that has become increasingly important for U.S. trade and economic interests largely explain the U.S. decision to remain a major military force in the region.

This rationale was presented in a Defense Department report released yesterday and intended to ease anxieties among some Asian allies about U.S. forces possibly abandoning them. The last such report, issued in 1992 in the immediate wake of the dissolu-

tion of the Soviet Union, indicated that U.S. forces in the region would continue to decline through the end of the decade.

The new report argues for a continued strong U.S. military presence in East Asia to protect American interests and foster regional stability.

"To support our commitments in East Asia, we will maintain a force structure that requires approximately 100,000 personnel," the report says, settling on a number roughly equal to the scaled-back U.S. troop level in Europe.

In reducing overall U.S. troop strength by about one-third since the height of the Cold War, the Pentagon has moved from basing large concentrations of American soldiers in Europe and Asia to a strategy centered more on projecting force when necessary from bases in the United States.

But the drawdown in Europe, where more than 400,000 soldiers were stationed, has been

more drastic than the cut in East Asia, where 135,000 U.S. soldiers were based in 1990.

The bulk of U.S. forces in East Asia have been located in South Korea and Japan.

"In light of the continuing conventional capability of North Korea, we have permanently

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halted a previously planned modest drawdown of our troops from South Korea, and are modernizing the American forces there as well as assisting the Republic of Korea in modernizing its forces," the Pentagon report stated.

At the same time, the report reaffirms

Troop Level to Stay at 100,000

U.S. plans to "shift from a leading to a supporting role," encouraging South Korea to bolster its own forces and pick up a larger share of regional defense costs. The United States has 37,000 troops in South Korea.

Reaffirming a U.S. commitment to defend Japan, the report says the United States will maintain an Air Force combat wing in the country as well as a Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa. Additionally, an aircraft carrier battle group and amphibious ready group will continue to be deployed in the region, the report says.

On China, the report notes that Beijing's military buildup has generated uncertainty about its plans and urges "greater transparency in China's defense programs, strategy and doctrine."

The Pentagon has expanded contacts with the Chinese military in hopes of establishing a more open relationship. U.S. naval vessels

plan to dock in Chinese ports this spring for the first time since Beijing's 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators.

To enhance security and stability arrangements beyond the traditional bilateral agreements that exist between the United States and a number of East Asian countries, the 32-page report calls for the creation of new multilateral institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Earlier efforts by the Clinton administration to promote multilateralism created some anxiety among Asian officials fearful that such talk was simply a cover for a U.S. withdrawal.

"While we are indeed stressing the increased importance of multilateral institutions, it's not at the cost of our primary attention to reinforcing the traditional security alliances we have in the region," Joseph Nye, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, told reporters at a briefing.